

WASHINGTON, DC - Today, Reps. Pete Stark and Patrick Kennedy were joined by 17 other House members in issuing a letter calling on the President's Council on Bioethics to take a more sensitive and balanced approach to mental illness. At issue were recent statements made by Council members and invited guests during official proceedings discounting the medical validity of depression and other mental health diagnoses.

"Council members have made scientifically questionable and outright divisive comments toward the 54 million Americans that suffer from mental illness and know all too well how real their suffering is," Rep. Stark said. "It is outrageous that the Council would give a sounding board to someone who would testify that 'Mental illness doesn't stand on all fours with physical illness' or a council member who says that 'the diagnosis of depression and other mental illnesses are driven by politics.' These comments are simply incorrect and further ingrain the destructive stigma too many Americans must overcome in seeking treatment for their mental illness," said Stark.

In their letter to the Council on Bioethics Chair Leon Kass, Stark, Kennedy and the 17 other House members write, "One of the stiffest barriers to care is the deep-seated stigma associated with mental illness. It is therefore of particular concern that during a number of its sessions, the Council reinforced damaging stereotypes and the stigma that threatens the health of many."

"Political leaders, health care professionals, and all Americans must understand and send this message: mental illness is not a scandal – it is an illness," the letter continues. "And like physical illness, it is treatable, especially when the treatment is early."

Stark, Kennedy and their colleagues are strongly recommending that the Council seek input from the National Institute of Mental Health and other reputable sources regarding the latest scientific developments in the field of mental health.

"We also hope that the Council's future deliberations and work will reflect the extraordinary advances in research and knowledge concerning mental illnesses, will take a more sensitive and balanced approach to discussions of mental health, and will help break down old stereotypes and assumptions," the letter concludes.

The full letter follows:

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

May 28, 2003

Leon R. Kass, M.D., Ph.D.  
Chairman  
President's Council on Bioethics  
1801 Pennsylvania Ave, N.W.  
Suite 600  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Chairman Kass:

It has recently come to our attention that under the rubric of examining "enhancement," members and guests of the President's Council on Bioethics have made a number of inaccurate statements that could increase the stigma and stereotypes associated with mental illness. Before the Council proceeds with any further hearings or reports concerning enhancement and mental illnesses and their treatments, we would strongly request that it seek clarification of the science of mental health from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, the Surgeon General's office, or other reputable sources.

The Council's consideration of enhancement examines, as we understand it, choices people make to move between "normal" states as opposed to treating an injury or disease. While we understand that over-prescription of certain psychopharmaceuticals may be a concern bearing examination, under-treatment of mental illnesses is a far greater concern. As the Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health explained in 1999, two-thirds of those with diagnosable mental illnesses go without treatment. President Bush himself has spoken to this problem, saying last year in an Albuquerque speech that "we must encourage more and more Americans to understand, and to seek more treatment."

One of the stiffest barriers to care is the deep-seated stigma associated with mental illnesses. It is therefore of particular concern that during a number of its sessions, the Council reinforced damaging stereotypes and the stigma that threatens the health of many. Council members' statements discounting the medical validity of depression or other diagnoses are contradicted by a voluminous science base developed by our premiere research institutions, such as the National Institutes of Health.

The President has recognized the great importance of overcoming the stigma attached to mental illness: "Political leaders, health care professionals, and all Americans must understand and send this message: mental disability is not a scandal – it is an illness. And like physical illness, it is treatable, especially when the treatment comes early." As a prominent creation of the White House examining medical questions, the Council bears special responsibility for sending that message. Unfortunately, some of the Council's discussions to date risk doing the opposite.

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We ask, therefore, that before proceeding further with its inquiries, the Council seek briefings concerning the latest science on depression and antidepressants, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder and its treatments, brain imaging in connection with mental illnesses, and other subjects relevant to its inquiries. We also hope that the Council's future deliberations and work will reflect the extraordinary advances in research and knowledge concerning mental illnesses, will take a more sensitive and balanced approach to discussions of mental health, and will help break down old stereotypes and assumptions.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Pete Stark, MC    Patrick Kennedy, MC  
Sherrod Brown, MC    Ted Strickland, MC  
Barbara Lee, MC    Michael R. McNulty, MC  
Louise McIntosh Slaughter, MC    Chris Bell, MC  
Lane Evans, MC    Dale E. Kildee, MC

Sam Farr, MC   Eliot Engel, MC  
Lloyd Doggett, MC   Tom Lantos, MC  
Luis Guitierrez, MC   Rush Holt, MC  
Bernard Sanders, MC   Ellen O. Tauscher, MC  
Janice Schakowsky, MC

cc: President George W. Bush  
Secretary Tommy Thompson, Department of Health and Human Services  
Director Thomas R. Insel, M.D., National Institute of Mental Health  
Chairman Michael F. Hogan, Ph.D., President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health  
Administrator Charles M. Curie, M.A., A.C.S.W., Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services  
Administration  
Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona, M.D., M.P.H., F.A.C.S.